

Edmonton city council declares state of climate emergency

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Body

EDMONTON—City council voted Tuesday to join municipalities around the world and declare a state of climate emergency in Edmonton, a move one resident likened to pulling a fire alarm.

"When you're at home and your house is on fire, you have to let everyone know, warn everyone to get out of the house, or put out the fire as soon as you can, because people's lives are at stake," Larry Zhong said.

The 21-year-old describes himself as an introvert, but with the effects of global warming threatening the world as he knows it, he was one of many Edmontonians compelled to speak out and ask the local government to recognize that climate change is a crisis and needs to be treated as one.

Shortly before noon, council voted 10-3 in favour of the move, with councillors Tony Caterina, Jon Dziadyk and Mike Nickel voting against. The motion, put forward by Councillor Aaron Paquette, also asks administration to report back on climate action progress and any future moves directed by Edmonton's Energy Transition Strategy.

"It simplifies the language. It says this is the page we are all on," Paquette said.

Paquette said he decided to move this forward to align Edmonton with other cities in the world looking to tackle climate change at the municipal level as they confront rising costs from extreme weather events and the risk of wildfires. In Canada, Halifax, Kingston, Vancouver and Ottawa have all declared a climate emergency.

"What that also does is it gives us a seat at the global climate change economic table," he said, clarifying that Edmonton would then be on the radar of investors and innovators who are working on these issues and are looking for cities taking it seriously.

In part, Paquette added, the motion was also driven by constituents - from young people to grandparents - who wrote to council over the past week asking the members to recognize the urgency for climate action and to declare the state of emergency.

"It just makes sense," he said. "And it's what Edmontonians have been asking for."

When the motion passed, one audience row in council chambers erupted in applause. Among them sat Erin Armstrong, one of several Edmonton residents, alongside Zhong, involved in the letter-writing campaign.

"I'm thrilled," Armstrong said. "For us, it's a sense of satisfaction that something is ... getting done. We've joined the global community in the fact that we're recognizing that there is an issue and now we can all start working together toward a solution."

Also an organizer with Extinction Rebellion Edmonton, the local chapter of environmental activists fighting for climate justice, Armstrong said the group has been working on having the city declare the emergency since May.

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One of the group's goals, she said, is for governments to tell the truth about climate change, starting with acknowledging the crisis, which then feeds into public opinion and awareness.

"When some citizens hear it from their government, it's more believable," Armstrong said of the declaration. "If people who aren't convinced hear it from the mayor's office, maybe they'll take it a little more seriously. It might make regular citizens a little more apt to go along with some of the harder decisions that are going to need to be made in the city."

The move also comes after it was revealed Edmonton was missing its mark on cutting carbon emissions. On Aug. 8, city officials announced that Edmonton's Energy Transition Strategy did not align with the goal of keeping the global average temperature increase below 1.5 C.

The city's goal was to emit no more than 155 megatonnes of carbon dioxide between 2017 and 2050. But officials said that at Edmonton's current emissions rate - 20 megatonnes annually - the city would exceed that within eight years.

According to a 2018 report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, curbing the average global temperature increase to 1.5 C would limit some of the destructive effects of climate change, including higher sea levels, iceless summers in the Arctic Ocean, and the decimated coral reefs.

In order to keep temperatures from rising above that mark, the report added, there needs to be "rapid and far-reaching" changes - human-caused carbon dioxide emissions would need to fall about 45 per cent from 2010 levels by 2030, and reach net zero around 2050.

Armstrong, who's also a mother of two children aged 7 and 9, didn't just write the letter for herself. She's worried about the kind of world her kids will inherit if governments aren't quick to act.

"They said that we have 12 years to make the changes, and I think of their ages in the 12 years," she said. "They might not have the freedom to explore their lives and have fun and pursue the things that they want to pursue. I just don't know what things are going to look like."

Following an Aug. 19 executive committee meeting discussion of the issue, councillors asked administration to find ways to tweak the strategy, and present it to council in the fall of 2020 for approval.

That meeting was met with a flood of submissions from residents urging for more immediate climate action.

Chris Gusen, one of the letter-writers who attended both city hall meetings, said the grim prospect of a world irreparably affected by global warming pushed him to shift his own behaviour and to drive for change at a public level.

"It's just not enough to take personal action and feel good about what you're doing; we're not moving fast enough, and we need collective action now," he said. "The value of declaring a climate emergency is that it sets the tone, and it can create a valuable symbol that is meaningful and worthwhile that the public can point to. That gives us sort of a lens through which to evaluate city actions."

Shortly before council declared the emergency, it moved to tweak the eight-point climate action plan presented a week before, and have both administration and the Energy Transition Advisory Committee return in December with an interim report on how to speed up efforts in response to the crisis.

"We're going to see reporting before the end of the year on changes we can make in response to this sense of urgency and state of emergency that we're in," Mayor Don Iveson told reporters after the meeting.

That response could affect everything from transportation to buildings, Iveson said, such as encouraging the private sector to consider carbon-neutral buildings, and moving toward the electrification of vehicle fleets.

Failure to act, or act quick enough, Councillor Andrew Knack noted in chamber, comes at a cost.

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"We're going to be spending \$1.6 billion over 10, 20 years to make sure our city is flood-resilient because of climate change," Knack said. "I would have loved to use that money on almost any other civic priority, and yet we have to - we have no choice. We've seen the information before us that says we have to do this now ..."

Although the city is lagging in its goals, Paquette said Edmonton is still ahead of most cities that often declare a climate emergency before working on a plan.

"We did it a little bit backwards. We did the work first, so when we declared a climate emergency, it wasn't just empty words. There will be actual actions and a plan that is strategic, smart and prudent behind those words," he said.

Backwards or not, Zhong sees both council's move Tuesday and the efforts of those who chose to speak up as a victory - one where citizens voiced their concerns over a world racked by climate change and had their government listen.

"We want to be able to look back and say, 'We did everything we could to prevent that from happening,'" he said. "It's to save the planet. That's what's at stake here."

Over the next few months, he and the others will be looking for more than just words.

They'll be looking for climate action.

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